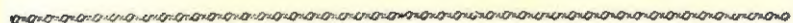


VOICE AND VISION OF ANITA DESAI



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SEEMA JENA

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Preface

ANITA Desai is one the most promising novelists writing in English today in India. In her recent fiction there are definite signs of fulfilment of the promise that her early novels held out to an audience looking out for fresh departures in the art of fiction of Indian writers writing in English.

The object of this dissertation is to provide certain clues for a better understanding of her fiction. As it is quite difficult to attempt any universal pattern that govern her work as a whole, here the focus is laid upon certain particular aspects which illumines the whole and provides a deeper insight into the total design of the writer's art.

The three major aspects which are necessary to understand Anita Desai are her characterization, themes and plots. She puts a lot of emphasis on her characters as her novels deal with the psychic aspect of the minds of individuals. The characters often

indulge in a self-analysis and discover themselves in the process. The writer shows through their narrative their fears, obsessions and neurosis and how they accommodate or alienate themselves from their surroundings. Extremely sensitive, they are quite intolerant towards any adversity and often rebel against the oppression from the family or society. Anita Desai's female characters are more realised and more neatly drawn. The problems and passions of most of these characters are rather existential. They opt for the illusion rather than reality, which often irks them. However, her characters are given more importance and story, plot, style are employed only to delineate them more clearly.

There are certain themes with which Mrs. Desai is often preoccupied, these themes are repeated in most of her novels though in different perspectives. The protagonist finds himself alienated and experiences a sense of loneliness as he is unable to communicate with people around. They drift away and create their world where they spin their dreams which are never fulfilled. The themes are dealt differently in each of her novels where the characters ultimately try to find an answer to their problems.

Anita Desai has been often accused of having a rather thin story line and a weak plot. However, one finds in her novels a well constructed structure where everything falls into place and the narrative becomes explicit. Her books are usually sectioned into three or four parts which makes the stream of consciousness technique more clear. There is always a foreplay of the past and present intermingling in her

novels so the sectional plan clarifies any confusion. There is a gradual growth to the climax and a denouncement comes after, but not with a shock.

She has a style supple and suggestive to narrate her experiences and the narration is almost lyrical. Her works abound in vivid description and life like portrayals. One can conclude that Anita Desai's fictional world has the quality of evanescence and the following pages are an attempt to explore her small but varied fictional world.

SEEMA JENA

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CHAPTER I

The Place of Anita Desai Among Indian Woman fiction-writers in English

To begin with a generalisation the novel is rooted in reality. It generally thrives in a complex society with a dense social structure. It devotes more attention to the individual refusing to accept the imposing abstractions and idealistic reproductions of the epic or romance. The novel explores the ordinary and common-place in all their bewildering complexity. Truthfulness is its motto, realism is its animating Principle.

Novel in the western world is primarily concerned with a pre-occupation with space and their effect on man in the flux and flow of history. Indo-Anglican literature on the other hand, though it began as a colonial adventure vaguely aspiring to continue the

English tradition on the native soil, very soon discovered its proper moorings in the values and experiences relevant in the Indian context.

The woman novelists of the Indo-Anglican fiction appeared in the literary scene fairly late as 1874 and significantly enough chose English as their medium of expression. The publication of Bankim Chandra's *Ram Mohan's Wife* and Lal Behari Dey's *Govinda Samanta* bore a testimony to the birth of a new era of emancipation for the Indian woman, an era of increased opportunities and a more dynamic participation in the country's problems ushered in by the great social reorientation which came in at the turn of the century. After independence the status of woman in the Indian Society underwent perceptible changes due to the spread of literacy, legislation and the experiences of the freedom movement. About a score of years appeared to have been enough to undo the inhabiting orthodoxies and taboos of thousands of years. Therefore, an important renewing theme in many of their works is an exploration of their identity, a study of their arrival at self-awareness. Since the woman novelist's socio-intellectual independence is tied up with India's political independence, Indian nationhood became a recurrent theme in all their works. They concerned themselves with everyday Indian Life, its customs, traditions and cultures and the consequent clash of the orient culture with their later western values and ideas. They are traditional and modern at the same time, and are often highly self-conscious and sometimes embarrassed on account of it. They preoccupied themselves with

the problems of women had contributed to fiction some very intimate pictures of women, isolated, as the Brahmin or Purdah—clad families, particularly during the period of adolescence when vigilance over the virgins was very strict. They not only attended to problems of women in the Indian Society, but were keen on portraying the social world, but in this respect they had rather a circumscribed vision. They were as it were, viewing society from their sheltered homes, not directly involved in the turmoil. Most of them came from upper middle class families and consequently did not have the opportunity to see the new society emerging out of a decaying colonial order.

Some of these women writers did try to give a realistic picture of India in its poverty, squalor and oppression, of the human suffering ensuing from the evils of an unjust social system. But their perceptions lack depth. Largely insulated and distanced, they view the broad social phenomena around them as curious observers not entirely familiar with the basic cultural and emotional conditions. This inadequacy of understanding some time manifests itself in startling ways rendering the pictures they portray, naive and spurious.

In the Indian context more often than not, the concern of the typical Indian does not go beyond the family. The affairs of the family constitute, for the average ordinary Indian the highest concern of life. He does not ordinarily involve himself with values or preoccupations that are entirely unconnected with his responsibilities as a member of a certain family. This means that, by and large, his socio-

cultural concerns would be of a traditional character. Even intimate personal experiences and psychological habits tend to be dominated by conventional moves and traditional perspectives. And yet with all these psychological constraints he leads an independent human life all of his own with a number of subterranean impulses, urges and tensions controlling his inner life and not adequately understood or tackled by him, some of them could have socio-cultural factors for their source and some others primarily psychological. But the Indo-Anglian woman writer attempting to describe the life of the ordinary Indian is largely satisfied in portraying the outer shell and rendering him more conventional and typical than any human being really is. Thus, for example man-woman relationship in the novels of these writers is mostly characterised by the conventional Indian male viewpoint. Without any proper insight into the complexity of the feminine experience.

The much discussed east-west theme has a greater authenticity of rendering in these writers. The concentration on the encounter between east and west is dramatised not only as the level of people but at the level of ideas. The impact of the west has created certain cultural problems, crises involves in Indian life and as such it is a theme par Indian significance. These writers have explored the metaphysical, spiritual and romantic aspects of this confrontation. The personal crises in life of each western educated hero or heroine becomes intercultural in nature. For instance the firm faith they had in their heritage and the age old traditions and

customs started tottering with the western impact, but an Indian cannot give up his Indian-hood so easily and totally and embrace the alien outlook.

One notices the nostalgia in treating the joint family and often the central figures in the novels in order to seek their own identities consciously try to break away from the kind of life they are nostalgia for. The institution of the joint family gives opportunity for group human behaviour; it symbolises an expansive pre-industrial way of life and it represents a deeply entrenched form of orthodoxy against which the individual may find himself helpless. It gives way for presenting the conflict between two sets of values, supremacy of social hierarchy and emergence of the individual.

Another theme that seems to have fascinated many novelists is the place of faith in the socio-cultural life of India. Adherence to rituals and a simple faith in the superior wisdom of a "guru", shape the action and conduct of a large number of people in the country. Exponents of this feature are Bhavani Bhattacharya and R.K. Narayan. Exposing the religious imposters has an aspect of social reform; while Sarat Chandra exposed the corruptions inherent in the idealised village life, Prem Chand fought against the systems of dowry and prostitution.

It is, however, after the second world war, that woman novelists of quality have begun enriching the Indian fiction in English. It can be claimed that Tonu Dutt was the first Indian woman writer in

English. Her *Bianca* (1878) was published posthumously. She wrote within the limits of her own experience and thus her works turned out to be largely autobiographical projections. Among other works of early woman writers may be mentioned Rajlaxmi Debi's *The Hindu Wife*, Cornolia Sorabjee's *Between the Twilights* and *India Calling*. However, fiction writing by Indian Women attained a certain maturity with the works of novelists like Kamala Markandya, Ruth Prawar Jhabwala, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Santha Rama Rao and Atia Husain.

Kamala Markandya is generally regarded as the most outstanding among these writers. She has nine novels to her credit, she has presented a wide and varied body of themes in her works. Her first work *Nectar in Sieve* (1954) has been compared with Pearl S Buck's *The Good Earth*. Her novels usually present a cross section of the Indian Society. Her works has broadly three facets—a personal story, a wider conflict and a social background. Her novels explore the social change in India in all its complex manifestations. She seeks to examine the transition from a traditional society to an urban industrial metropolitan society in all its comprehensiveness. She aims to project the Indian life in the villages portraying the change in their lives as token of the profound change taking place in the entire nation. *Nectar in Sieve* projects life in a South Indian village where the life has been stagnant for the last many years. Industry and modern technology invade the village in the shape of a tannery, and from this certain sinister developments take place. The novel

recounts the touching tale of Rukmini, narrator and heroine of the novel and her triumph over the forces that surround and threaten to overwhelm her. Her other works include *Some Inner Fury*, *A Silence of Desire Possession*, *The coffer Dams*, *The Nowhere Man*, *Two Virgins* and *The Golden Honeycomb*.

The other prominent novelist in the cadre is Ruth Prawar Jhabwala. Her works abound in themes exploiting the clash between traditional codes and modern aspirations. She had conditioned to a background dissimilar to that of the other Indian writers and she brings a kind of discipline and broad outlook to bear on the contemporary situations in urban India. If in *A Backward Place* she discussed the struggles and sufferings of an Indian girl married to an Englishman in *Esmond in India*, she weaves together strands of irony, comedy and satire presenting a fascinating work of art. Her work is varied and she has been labelled as an approximation of Joseph Conrad with a feminine contemporary urban sensibility. Her satire is sharp but not deadly and the deft handling of the conflict and clash of background of the west and east is brought out very prominently. Her other works are, *Get Ready for Battle*, *A Backward Place* and *Heat and Dust*.

Nayantara Sehgal the next major woman novelist of India, wrote novels mostly with political overtones. She hailed from a family which produced eminent politicians and her experiences are very eloquently projected in her novels. Her works give an account of what happens in the corridors of

power, in the drawing rooms of politically important people or in the lobbies of the Parliament. She writes with great ease and sophistication and is claimed as one of the best 'Critical' novelists of India. However, her weakness for political themes and her command over English are more impressive than her art as an novelist.

These happen to be the major women novelists of India and their works constitute the bulk of fiction writing in India. As discussed earlier these writers along with a few others like Santha Ram Rao and Attia Husain have tried to portray the various facts of Indian life with far flung topics which range from Independence and British regime to caste system, Feudalistic corruption and exploitation, hopelessness of the ordinary folks, their beliefs and customs, the orthodox upper class, the clash of the generations. But few have been indeed, the books, that try to portray the psychic element involving these themes in its fullness. The tension and anxiety of being modern in a traditional society have been overlooked by most of these writers who have devoted their attention to broad social features that emerge in course of the gradual metamorphosis of the old order, so intense was their devotion to the physical aspects of this change, that they failed to properly take note of and project the psychological reality. The world undergoing a rapid change with the advancement of scientific and technological know how, rapid progress of communication, and growth of industrialisation had made the world spiritually starved and rendered man alienated and bewildered. Trying to adjust with the split, the nove-

list had to overcome many psychological hinderances, trials and tribulations had often failed in his attempts. These victories or failures constitute the major theme of twentieth century European fiction.

In India, Anita Desai was the one novelist who added a new dimension to English fiction by Indian Women writers by concentrating on the exploration of sensibility, a particular kind of modern Indian Sensibility which is till at ease, among provincials and philistines, the anarchists and amoralists. In Jhavala's work the social background is rather more important than the characters, in Kamala Markandayas', the account is as much on the Principal characters as a diverse background matters like economic, political, social, cultural situations. Nayantara Sehgal, while dealing social problems, confines herself to a particular social class namely the upperclass and the aristocracy.

In the novels of Anita Desai, on the other hand, the focus is on the inner climate, the climate of sensibility. Her main concern is to depict the psychic state of her protagonists, at a crucial juncture of their lives. To support this theory she has forged a style supple and suggestive enough to convey the fever and fretfulness, the eddies and currents in the stream of consciousness of her characters. The grapple with thoughts, feelings and emotions is reflected in language, syntax and imagery. While dealing with language and style, one should not forget that one of the major obstacle the Indo-Anglian novelist has to overcome is the difficulty in writing the dialogue, because he has to translate

into an alien language the racy colloquial vigour of the Indian life. If the writer limits himself to the educated sections of the Indian Society this problem does not much arise. But since true India is still the India of the villages, any writer who ignores the ordinary illiterate Indian would be guilty of oversimplification and distortion of the Indian reality. Another handicap of the Indo-Anglian novelist is that, the Indian society permits the individual to define himself in terms of a distinct social framework. The individual to a very large extent is subordinated to the group. Such an environment is not conducive to the growth of the novel. Further the socio-political impact of the freedom struggle has complicated the situation for the Indo-Anglian novelist as it encouraged him to see reality in terms of abstractions, such as the noble leader and the ignoble sycophant the exploited coolie and the exploiting foreigners. The novelist has to face a highly stylized picture of the conflict between gigantic opposites, the past *versus* the present, spirituality opposed to science and so on. The writer presents his characters as types rather than as individuals, character is subordinated to the main business of telling a story. The mood of comedy or tragedy, the sensitivity to atmosphere, the probing of psychological factors, the crisis in the individual soul and its resolution, and above all the detached observation are all forced into the background. A major deficiency of the Indo-Anglican novel is lack of the 'sense of form'; which is a sign of maturity of an art-form, Struggling with the task of telling a story the, Indo-Anglican novelist has a tendency to think in terms of chapters. Very few Indo-Anglican

novels convey the impression of a controlling intelligence at work. The mature artistry that can harmoniously blend matter with manner or design with detail is a very rare thing in Indo-Anglican novel.

In spite of such handicaps, however, Anita Desai has tried to introduce a modern Psychological vein and projects a sensibility generally not encountered in other Indo-Anglican writers of fiction. As a novelist her distinguishing qualities are many, the chief among them being the subordination of the background to the characters and the deft handling of language, imagery and syntax in order to convey an intimate expression of the inner world of her characters. She insists on analysing her character and the story is important only in so far as it reflects the obsessions of her characters. Free from a journalistic enthusiasm for depicting the socio-political life in India, Mrs. Desai makes each work of her, a haunting exploration of the psychic self.

The reader's first impression of reading Anita Desai is, therefore, one of brave originality and uniqueness. Though many may find her contortions are many, and are often the result of excessive celebration on the author's part, and not always determined by the movements in the consciousness of the characters. With her early childhood nurtured in a Brontean world she has imbibed depth and hue of the fiction-writers of the west. If the western writers presented her with general criteriology for her choicest field, the poets of the east furnished her with the charms of rhythms and style, whatever she

heartily welcomed was deeply and successfully entrenched within to enrich her creative perspective.

Even a cursory glance into the works of the writer would reveal three important areas of excellence; characterisation, theme and plot structure. Her style unique in its own way is beautifully suited to her need and the characters and themes are neatly organised under a compact pattern that each novel becomes as it were a distinctive world in miniature.

Her characters are generally neurotic females, highly sensitive, sequestered in a world of dreams and imagination and alienated from their surroundings as a consequence of their failure or unwillingness to adjust with the reality. They often differ in their opinion from others and embark on a long voyage of contemplation in order to find the meaning of their existence. After all their wanderings, they usually arrive at a juncture where either they find that after all their urgency has been in some essential manner very significant as in case of Bim in *Clear Light of Day* or may damage themselves unable to solve the mystery, that envelops their suffering, like Maya and Monisha. Her characters build a large spectrum. There are individuals of multifarious dimensions, like the detached and practical Gautama, the rebel Nirode, the artist Dharma, the sensitive immigrant Dev and many others.

Coming to her themes, Anita Desai seems to have opted for portraying various themes at a time in her novels and in each individual novel these themes seems to be occurring again and again. She usually starts by presenting a person who is cut

out in a different grain from others. They resist the demands of society and turn out to be rebels. Not finding a proper channel of communication they become alienated and start brooding on their lives. All their wanderings and reflections finally bring them into new vistas of understanding which they had formerly ignored or rejected. Anita Desai's themes are thus original and entirely different from those of other Indo-Anglican novels. Her novels are not political or sociological in character but are engaged in exposing the labyrinths of the human mind and in indicating the ways to psychological fulfilment. Thus, her themes tend to wedge off the tracks of other novelists. Each aspect merges with the other and sometimes one finds a number of themes woven together. Using these themes as a foundation the writer is able to build up her characters into a significant whole.

A writer dealing with the psychological aspects of her characters has to employ a certain design by which the inner workings of the protagonist's mind is unfolded to the readers gradually with the progress of the narrative. As in the case of her themes and her characters Anita Desai's plots too are not repetitive. Each book has an individual structural pattern of its own. However, all the mechanisms she employs, lends the work an unique harmony where incidents, people, situations combine to produce an artistic whole. One can say that her plots are not so much deliberate contrivances as natural and inevitable outgrowth of the theme and perspective. As the story advances she seems to be quietly

sliding in her scenes, settings and characters, without much of an advance preparation.

As her forte is the psychic presentation of individual human beings, the narrative is rightly allowed to move freely and not clogged by blocks and patterns artificially imposed from outside. But it is not as if there is no subtlety or control of plot structure. But the plot is always simple and neat enough so as not to impede the psychological revelation, and it is always well defined enough to present her vision clearly, her plot structures, therefore, show a splendid fusion of form and expression, contrivance and spontaneity.

Anita Desai took the literary world by a storm with the publication of her first novel *Cry, the Peacock* in 1968. She has written seven novels so far. They are '*Voices in the City*' (1965), *Bye, Bye Blackbird* (1971), *Where Shall We Go this Summer* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *IN Custody* (1984).

She had once said that "writing is hell, but not writing is definitely worse." She holds no special critical theory of the novel. Though her books have not been quite a success, so far as sales are concerned, she presents the dilemma of modern man very effectively.

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CHAPTER II

Characterization in the Works of Anita Desai

ONE of the chief delights of fiction is the satisfaction of our desire to know about man as he is himself, and in relation to his society. A novelist should, therefore, carve man's image in his art with an social awareness and insight into life. The Indo-Anglican novelist generally writes in the classical tradition and seeks to project an integrated view of man's identity, his place in society and the social values, there within which he works out his destiny. Anita Desai is an exception, that instead of presenting man in conflict with the society, she rather wishes to keep her focus on man in conflict with his mind. Her forte is the exploration of the human psyche. The social concern is present in

the form of cultural polarisation, conflict between traditional values and westernised ideas, but they are organised to highlight the mental development of the characters. She is gifted with a style and a sensibility to suit her aesthetic goal of delineating her central subject of a world weary character fighting and struggling to be free from the nets laid by society, in which he is enmeshed. Among the Indian writers in English she is perhaps the most self-conscious artist "forging an unique world out of things of day-to-day existence of an Indian female."

Here is a small world, but it has a form and colour of its own design to convey a special creative impulse, not derived from tradition. For her, reality consists in the raw materials of existence: the passing moods and attitudes, that keeps disturbing from moment to moment. It is for this reason that she does not address herself to a larger sphere of social and political questions but creates a private world of her own, her creative effort being directed at seizing upon the raw materials of life, its shapelessness and meaninglessness, that lack of design, that drives one to despair.

Her novels are certainly reflective of social realities, but she does not dwell like Anand on social issues; and rather delves deep into the forces that condition the growth of a female in the patriarchal, patrilineal, male dominated Indian family. She observes social realities from a psychological perspective, not as a social reformer or moralist.

Confining herself, as she does, to a circumscribed

milieu, she is yet able to create and achieve remarkable depth and intensity. Most of her major characters have a near-neurotic quality about them. Exceptionally gifted, they are constantly disturbed by familial ties that they find uncomfortable and inescapable at the same time, and with which they cannot reconcile their individual values. Maya of *Cry, the Peacock* is a highly sensitive creature. Brought up in an illusory world of romantic faith she fails to adjust with her practical and down to earth husband. Nirode is a rebel, but he fails to keep up the link with his mother and is constantly at loggerheads with himself as he cannot either completely detach himself or establish a satisfactory relationship. Bim is admired for her courage, for her resolve to live without hanging on to some one, yet her bitterness sprouts from the familial disturbances caused by Raja and Tara. Nanda Kaul is an admirable person but in spite of her efficiency, carriage and talents, she had led a life of deprivation in the world of her husband and children, and retires to "Carignano", passionately pledged to a life of loneliness. A common trait in all major characters of Anita Desai is their longing to be free of all kinds of social and familial involvement. They are constantly striving to avoid emotional entanglement and social responsibility. Bim, however, is an exception; deeply committed to certain responsibilities even while struggling against the consequent psychological strain is her peculiarity.

A regular feature in most of the Indo-Anglican novels is the treatment of character as types rather than as individuals. In Anita Desai, however, there

is a striking departure from this practice. Although her characters might display a particular set of psychological complexes and represent certain universal predilections and conflicts, essentially they are independent individuals with special, distinct identities of their own. There is in each one of them a sense of deprivation caused by family ties. Maya is in search of an identity and an communion with her husband. Nirode tries to breach his family ties to set up himself independently, but fails miserably as he is unable to sever all connections from his mother. Nanda Kaul, forced into the role of a dutiful wife for a number of years, feels emotionally drained out and retires to the Simla hills to find peace in loneliness. But her alienation is very temporary, and she is unconsciously pulled back into her former life with the advent of Raka into her sequestered world. Sita and Sarah hopelessly fail to achieve their goals and in the end give in to the demands of their husbands, and surrender themselves. Bim is full of bitterness in the beginning, but eventually she tries to put things together and towards the end is able to find some kind of a resolution. Bim is a mature creation. After experimenting with five novels, Desai could create in her a mature, strong and reasonable protagonist like Bim. While the other characters give up their fights halfway, she struggles to the end and emerges victorious.

The protagonists embark on their individual voyages in quest of an unattained ideal. In the process they become involved in a search for identity and like the knight of the Grail Legend

have to undergo untold sufferings before they can achieve their goal. They are powerful characters, who break down under the stress of the misery, but they remain staunch individuals very much conscious of their independence and find it difficult to accept conventional equations and strike a balance with the people around them. Anita Desai's heroines are not just variations of Nora or Alison.

Her novels are then studies of the inner life of characters and since she creates a small milieu, her narrative focus becomes precise and clear. This provides her with an opportunity to observe all the minute details in the environment of the characters. Anita Desai is gifted with an extraordinary sense for details, a capacity for graphic delineation of things, usually left unnoticed, and is able to present a very realistic picture.

She employs a variety of techniques to show the fear and anxiety-neurosis with which her sensitive young women are sized. In tracing the neurosis and death phobia of Maya, the psychologically disturbed heroine of *Cry, the Peacock*. She employs the technique of "fugue" a term used by Frink to suggest the morbid fears by which a person feels constantly threatened. By employing this device she makes the novel a fascinating psychological study of neurotic fears caused by marital incompatibility and disharmony and compounded by age-old superstitions. Even in certain ordinary habits and mannerism they reflect this sense of disharmonious, alienated existence. For instance many of the women characters cultivate styles and behaviour

that are designed to throw into relief their difference from others. Along with this feeling of psychological insecurity they are endowed with the related quality of intense and sometimes morbid self-introspection. They are sensitive and imaginative enough to discover and have a proper appreciation of the meaninglessness of their existence. Maya which means illusion had a sheltered childhood under the protective care of an indulgent father. She enters into matrimony with Gautama a person much older than her and much more rational and practical. Whereas Maya is extremely sensuous, Gautama has more intellectual and philosophical attitude to life. This results in an intense feeling of alienation and deprivation in Maya giving way to tragic consequences. In *Bye, Bye Blackbird*, similarly the contrast is between a life of acceptance and adjustment and one of rejection and isolation. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer*, the conflict is between 'No' and the potent 'Yes' the protagonists find themselves between the horns of these conflicts and the moment they try to escape they meet disaster. Maya, Monisha and Nanda Kaul all face a particular dilemma in their lives mainly nurtured by marital disharmony and all three meet a fateful end.

Anita Desai's protagonists are people born out of loveless marriages, people who try to shun reality and escape into a dream world nurtured by their fantasies, people who break away from what is real and rational and feel terribly alienated. They always evince a tendency to escape—sometimes the character seeks to flee from the past as in case of

Nanda Kaul or the present as in case of Sita, to seek shelter in an illusory world of their own creation.

Though Mrs. Desai drops an occasional comment to persuade the reader to adopt a certain attitude towards her characters, more often her views are implicit and originally issue from character and action. The necessary aim is evoked, the right emotion is elicited from the reader through a series of objective descriptions. That Maya is a hyper-sensitive, highly-strung, young woman tottering on the brink of insanity, is suggested by a detached description of Maya's excessively sentimental hysterical response to the death of Toto. Maya cannot bear the sight of the corpse, she is shown "rushing to the tap to wash the vision from her eyes", "she thought she saw the glint of a blue bottle and grew hysterical," the evening sun appears to be swelling visibly like she thought a "purulent boil until it was ripe to drop." Such subjective, highly impressionistic and hysterical responses, the careful repetition of the qualifying phrase, "she thought and grew hysterical," force the reader to regard Maya as a person gifted with a highly poetic, but slightly neurotic sensibility. Her neurosis becomes acute due to the lack of communication between her husband and herself. In one of her broodings she cries, "I was alone, Yes, I whimpered, it is that I am alone," Loneliness is something to which most of the protagonists of Anita Desai are a prey. They fail to find a point of contact with people around them and gradually drift away and become alienated. Sita cannot understand why her daughter tears up her paintings and Sarah fails to understand both her

husband and her mother and desperately tries to make the best of her two worlds the one she has rejected and the other which rejects her. Thoroughly disgusted with their past life they desperately try to attain the peace that was denied to them in the family and the society by a process of arbitrary withdrawal and cultivated psychological distancing. *Fire on the Mountain*, presents the character Nanda Kaul who has all along resented her role in the family even while bravely playing it with apparent satisfaction and calm whose only fervent desire now is to be left utterly alone in her mountain retreat. She resents the intrusion of outside elements into her secluded world to the extent of having a horror of even postal contact. The novel abounds in observations like the following.

She relished the sensation of being alone again. That was one time she had been alone: a moment of private triumph cold and proud.

Sita's escape to the El-dorado of her childhood home on the island also reflects a longing to flee from a dull and mundane life where one has no privacy. Monisha, unable to cope with the people at her husband's home retreats to pour out her agonies in the diary and when she could no longer bear the humiliation she commits suicide. Bim an unique and much more mature creation of Anita Desai, fails to understand the world around her, in spite of her brave efforts to tolerate and adjust with others. Bim is a later development, when the author had completed her experimentation on varied range of personalities, is different from

Desai's other protagonists. There is in her an unfailing courage to endure the implications of fate. Her whole life is one of sacrifice and tolerance. She does not shrink from responsibility, but faces them and tries to fight out her way. Unlike Tara she is not an escapist who runs into matrimony sensing the trouble at her home. Bim nurses both Raja and Mira Masi and after that she also looks after Baba. Her life is one of constant struggle for survival. In spite of all these virtues, however, she too fails to psychologically adjust with her brother and sister. This lack of adjustment makes Desai's protagonists into a cloistered world created by themselves away from the environment that is repulsive to them. There they try to spend their days in weaving fantasies and trying to be aloof and detached but all the time unknowingly being drawn out of their cocoons and forced into commitments they had sought to reject.

Most of the heroines of Anita Desai bear the scars of a particular kind of emotional deprivation; they are either motherless like Maya and Sita or products of a broken homes like Bim and Nanda Kaul or sterile. They try to preserve their independence zealously and they think that by getting themselves alienated they will achieve their goal; the discovery of their identities. It is this nostalgia for independence that turns them into rebels. They grow into non-conformists, sometimes even wayward people—who cannot find peace in a fixed situation. They are usually drifters. They engage themselves in lengthy passages of contemplation to explain to themselves the nature of their urges and

impulses. Thus, Nirode is poetic and fanciful but isolated and has reached a preconscious disillusioned maturity.

He himself knew by instinct that he was a man for whom aloneness alone was worth treasuring.

Nanda Kaul tries to get in solitude the independence, denied to her during her days as the Vice-Chancellor's wife.

"The old house, the full house, of that period of her life when she was the Vice-Chancellor's wife and at the head of a small but intense and busy world, had not pleased her. Its crowding had stifled her. She was glad when it was over. She had been glad to leave to all behind, in the plains, like a great, heavy, difficult book that she had read through and was not required to read again." "Discharge me she groaned I have discharged all my duties."

These characters cannot, however, be dubbed as escapists, for they discharge their duties allotted to them quite effectively, but resent the circumstances in which they have to operate, Nanda Kaul, Bim, Sita, Sarah are dutiful wives and daughters. They discharge their duties quite efficiently, but most of the time they feel crushed under the load of responsibilities and long for a release and when they find themselves free from the enmeshing net of duties they try to get what they had been robbed of in the past. Bim, Sita, Sarah, Nanda Kaul are always bogged down playing their respective roles as wife, daughter and mother and they try to find peace by

forcing themselves into a state of alienation. In an interview with Yashodhara Dalmia for the Times of India, April 29, 1979, Mrs. Desai had given some aspects regarding her characters in the following way.

I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or have been driven into some extremity of despair and to turn against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with the current, it makes no demands, it costs no effort, but those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out 'the great No' who fight the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.

Unlike most of the Indo-Anglian novelists, Anita Desai does something unique by portraying each of her individuals as an unsolved mystery. In respect of the treatment of theme and setting, *Cry, the Peacock*; *Where Shall We Go this Summer* and *Fire on the Mountain* are very much similar. These three novels portray female protagonists who are not average, but have retreated, or have been driven into some extremity of despair and so have turned against or are made to stand against, the general current. Withdrawn into a life of seclusion and loneliness, their material wants are taken care by affluence of wealth and luxury, but their emotional needs are much more difficult to meet.

According to R.S. Sharma, Maya's neurosis originates in the presence of the father in the unconscious. That she suffers from a father-fixation is apparent from the various incidents in the novel.

This fixation is later extended to her image Gautama and Maya's tragedy lies in the inadequate emotional transference from father to husband, and this blocks her encounter with reality. Gautama himself explains to her the reason of her sorrow:

You have a very obvious father—obsession, which is also the reason why you married me, a man much older than yourself the realization that another person, both close to you and your father does not place the same trust as you do in the adored figure—shakes your faith. . . .

Her hopes are thwarted by the prediction of the albino astrologer who foresaw her death or that of her partner four years after her marriage and this is aggravated by Gautama's avid rationalistic way of life. The world of her father, a world of love, tenderness, flowers and Urdu Poetry, and the world of Gautama a world of absolute detachment and avid philosophy, where love is not love and where everything is reduced to the dictums of Bhagvad Gita. Both Maya and Gautama indulge in lengthy discussions on the nature and meaning of death and in the process reveal their own philosophies of life. The death of Toto brings these altitudes into a sharp collision. For Gautama death is a cessation, a physical termination of human activity. He mocks the very idea of mourning, death for him is a 'disappearance', but for Maya, 'it was a cruel word, cruelly spoken.' The lack of communication, between husband and wife is evident from their views on this question. She gives up her effort in making him understand things as she feels, that the

truth of living, the quality of existence, the colour and flavour of each passing moment of life, are things to be felt, not to be described or explained. Maya is a girlish Mrs. Dalloway who has created a dream world as illusory as her name and who does not find fulfilment with her husband's solid rationality. She views her relationship with Gautama as a relationship with death and she tries to escape. Maya's anguish finds its correlation in the agony of the Peacocks, and once she discovers this identity she becomes tragically aware of her own predicament, 'I am dying and yet I am in love with living,' she cries out. Her passion is not merely for Gautama the man; he is in fact her point of contact with reality, his rational world has little room for her fantasy. Maya revolts against this denial of life and thinks of him in terms and an ascetic like Buddha. Maya reads the slokas from the Gita, but her understanding of detachment is different from that of Gautama. They fail to meet on a common ground.

"All that I felt now at his surprise was resignation and even relief. It had only underlined an awareness a half deadness to the living world which helped and strengthened me by justifying my unspoken decision."

This is the speech of a woman who has come to the crucial decision to murder her husband as she is committed to life, while her husband according to her is indifferent to it. Thus, Gautama's death is not a calculated murder or accident but a result of

sudden impulse, Maya feels that she has a right to live as she loves life.

On the other hand In *Fire on the Mountain* we come across the aged Nanda Kaul, in her decrepit summer villa, her abode after the death of her Vice-Chancellor husband. Once an important figure of a Society as well as in her vast family, she is one of those intelligent, unsentimental Indian women with a built-in-streak of Sardonic feminism who do not love their matriarchal role. Whereas she had previously tended to her children with pleasure and pride, entertained her husband's colleagues and students, "looking sharply to see if the dark furniture, all rosewood, had been polished, and the doors of the gigantic cupboards properly shut," she now has a different attitude towards her personal environment. The care of others was a habit Nanda had mislaid. It had been "a religious calling she had believed in still she had found it fake." The unexpected arrival of Raka unnerves Nanda and disturbs her privacy. Earlier, left to herself, Nanda "could groan", with self-pity and pain, "certainly that she was alone and no one would hear." Now in Raka's presence, "She could never groan aloud again, the child would hear."

Raka has a rickety upbringing with parents both peripatetic and neurotic. She too is alienated like her great grand mother. She is presented as a shy, wild, withdrawn, alienated, not entirely attractive and a rather ubiquitous creature. Both Raka and Nanda work out the means by which they would live together avoiding each other, but Nanda pain-

fully realizes that "it was not so simple to exist and yet appear not to exist." The total seclusion of Raka brings a sort of self-realization and metamorphosis in Nanda's attitude. Realizing that Raka lacks the tender care and love due to her as a child, Nanda's attitude changes slowly and she begins to woo Raka with long stories about her imaginary childhood trying to make contact by hooking Raka's curiosity. Raka is too wary to be caught.

The third part of the novel introduces yet another female character—Ila has been Nanda's childhood friend, a ludicrous spinster starving on her pittance as a social worker, comes to have tea one evening at "Carignano". The visit is shown as an unmitigated disaster. Her life suggests another dimension of misery and meaningless existence. Her real involvement in people's welfare assumes tremendous symbolic significance when contrasted with the barren, unfulfilled and lonely existence of Nanda Kaul. Nanda's overwhelming will for the potential transcendence of the human spirit is totally regated by another equally lurid act, that of Raka's setting fire to the hillside. These two incidents shatter for ever Nanda's world and reverie, she realizes only bilatedly that her whole life, or rather the version of it she has always accepted, has been a lie; her past as a valued and loved hostess, wife and mother as much as her present dignified and a deceptive retirement. The fictive world of Nanda Kaul is consumed by the fire.

Unlike other female protagonists of Anita Desai, Bim is free from the traumas of a shattered child-

hood or an incompatible marriage. She is symbolic of forces that have sustained all the foundation of all family life. She becomes symbolic of the archetypal sustaining mother, a metaphor that Anita Desai subtly employs to reaffirm and reassert the life-themes in the novel. Bim's revolt against the traditional image of Indian woman is manifested in all that she says or does. Unlike most Indian girls, she opts out of marriage for a life of chosen spinsterhood to pursue a career and a way of life which she accepts gracefully despite its limitations. This decisions she takes of her own will. It is quite evident that she is more admired and adored of the two sisters. She had a near sure offer of marriage from Dr. Biswas and continues to draw amorous responses from men around her, including Bakul. She refuses to play the conventional role of a submissive wife and becomes in a sense a truly liberated women. Unlike Nanda Kaul, Bim achieves her identity and her 'self' not in isolation but in togetherness, not in rejection, but in acceptance, not in withdrawal, but in positive commitment. Her commitment to her role sustains Bim against the onslaughts of time and makes her the sustaining force of the family. She is peculiarly enough, both traditional and modern in her ideals. She is decisive and firm in her resolve to carry on the task on which she has set her mind. She is very courageous, and does not break easily with grief. She shoulders all the responsibilities instead of shrinking away from them. However, she is not an un-witting agent of destruction like Nirode's mother, as she never tries to overpower her brother and sister, but allows them to embrace their chosen paths. She

prefers a life of adventure with a constant struggle. "Rich, fat and successful people are extremely boring" she says. She leads a life as she pleases not to please others. She feels a certain degree of bitterness when Raja walks out on her and Tara marries Bakul and goes away. Bim makes a contrast between her own life and that of Aurangzeb. Aurangzeb's intolerance, his puritanism, his exclusiveness, his cruelty to his Kith and Kin in pursuit of power and purity is widely known. His last words addressed to prince Azam and to his Kam—Baksh not only provide a moving commentary on the drama of history and politics, on the games that people play in pursuit of their own biases and prejudices on the futility of pride and arrogance, however, noble against the transience of life, but they also become the mirror in which Bim discovers her fate of her own life. She rejects Aurangzeb as an example of egocentricity and in rejecting him, she also rejects a past of hatred and bitterness. She destroys the letter, which Raja had written to her, which had hurt her so deeply and had made her bitter. She realises the essential truth of the situation and forgives. This realization marks her transition from hatred to love, from alienation to accommodation from rejection to acceptance, from egotism to altruism. The apparently absurd world of Bim and her family acquires a new meaning once they see themselves not in isolation, but in togetherness, not as isolated threads but as a part of a design. In this state of harmony and blessedness even the inarticulate Baba becomes vocal.

Bim repeats the last words of the emperor "to herself like a prayer" and she experiences a 'stillness' that settles over her mind. In that awakening and recognition, she makes an evaluation of her own self and rejects all that had hindered her growth into a truly liberated soul. Rejecting her inauthentic self and aberrations, she moves, towards the realization of a new authentic self. The final pages of the novel capture the bouyancy of her soul. She discovers her last connection in the embraces and kisses of her nieces, that follow the night of her anguish. Resurrected and rejuvenated, Bim suggests a resurrected and rejuvenated India. It is only in the last pages that Bim could find the balm for her tormented soul, and everything that threatens to disrupt the pattern of life is brought under control though love, understanding, forgiveness and mutual acceptance. Bim is successful in her quest for liberty and identity. She does not spin a fictitious world around her like Nanda Kaul, nor escapes like Sita to an island in search of peace. Bim stays steadfast to her resolve and realizes her position and tries to find some meaning to her existence. As a more maturer creation of Anita Desai, she embodies these qualities which enable a person to rise above despair and challenge all viccitudes and emerge victorious.

Anita Desai's major preoccupation as a novelist has been the delineation of characters. Each of her novels is primarily designed to project one or two memorable characters. In the character portrayal again, she is primarily interested in the projection of female protagonists living in a separate, closed,

sequestered world of existential problems and passions, love and hatred, she portrays her characters as individuals facing single handed, the ferocious assaults of existence. Carefully eschewing feminist impulses, she makes it clear that for all her concentration on her concern, as an artist is with those individual men and women, she is out for the subject of psychologically liberating her female protagonists not to whip up any interest in a mass of women marching forward under the banner of feminism. "Only the individual, the solitary being is of true interest. One must be alone, silent, the order to think to contemplate."

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CHAPTER III

Thematic Patterns

ANITA Desai's conception of a theme is not unconnected with her concept of characterization. If her protagonists happen to be alienated characters, who fail to establish a contact with people around them, her themes are so organised and developed as to enable her characters to fully mature and portray themselves. Her ideal being a pattern to contrive a pattern out of a world of chaos, she prefers not to draw on the established themes, plots and people for her creative world, she is not in favour of casting her human material in conventional moulds, making use of prefabricated domes, structures, pinnacles or towers just for the sake of outward effects.

Some of her recurrent themes which captivates the reader's attention while fleeting through her

books, are loneliness resulting from alienation which is an outgrowth of a loss of contact and communication with the surroundings, environment and finally resulting in revolt. The protagonists seek a voyage in search of their identity and are sometimes successful in finding an answer to their questions like Bim in *Clear, Light of Day* or experiences the bitter truth like Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*. Almost all the themes that she tries to focus in her works are interconnected and result due to the lack of a proper understanding with life.

Maya's loneliness is born out of a lack of communication with her husband, Gautama; Maya, an introvert, fond of art, literature and music, is a colourful hypersensitive lady. Her husband Gautama an upholder of the idealism of the past, is an intellectual extrovert. The writer has set them in a very interesting contrast. The employment of a contrast is a very effective technique used by Anita Desai to explain why her characters become alienated and withdraw into their cocoons. Maya is not unaware of 'Maya'—the illusory happening that appears live and real but is prone to losing sight of them, whereas a bit flabbergasted and dazzled Gautama with all his wit and intellect doesn't seem to take a woman more than a chattel. The writer has very skillfully contrasted the differences of values they hold dear to themselves. The novel starts with the death of Toto, Maya's pet dog. Morbidly she immerses herself in mourning her dog's death, unable to reconcile herself with the realities of daily routine, she desperately wants her

husband to feel the piognancy of her day's happenings, but is repelled by his surgeon like responses as he performs the last rites of Toto. For Gautama drinking tea is a sensible solution to Maya's problem.

The theme of marital disharmony is initially suggested through the contrasted symbolism of the 'velvet bug' and the ring with the ruby and is intensified later through the symbolic dance of the peacocks. These incidents suggest one aspect which Desai tries to portray in all her novels, the various degrees of erosion of sensibility in marital relationships and various kinds of nullities. In all these relationships marriage appears to be the ultimate fatality for a woman in a society where everything including philosophy seems to conspire against her longing for individual freedom. The mental and emotional incommensurability between Gautama and Maya is revealed in their attitudes towards death. The death of Toto stands symbolically for her own psychic death to which Gautama is oblivious, Maya sees this death in their very relationship. They do not share anything—not even the sensibility that can differentiate between the "half-sweet", "half-sad fragrance of petunias" and "some astugent" "smell of lemons."

"I am alone" she cries out in agony. Her thoughts and feelings are immensed within herself unable to find a common chord with her life partner. The prophecy of the albino astrologer long buried under the load of years, is thrown like lava and glares at her in all its alienness and fury. The

solitude and silence of the house preys upon her and she is suffocated in her agonies. The eerie bit of experience she underwent as a little girl, of being told of an unnatural death of her husband or herself in the fourth year of her marriage, and she recollects with a pang that the crucial year has arrived. The long-forgotten but newly—remembered prophecy acts upon Maya with the same force as the prophecy of the witches acts upon Macbeth. On the other hand Gautama breezily dismisses the possibility of stars influencing human lives, but deep in Maya's consciousness the terror persists and paralyzes more and more the normal motions of her mind and heart. She is a solitary pathetic figure who has entered into wedlock, in the hope of reviving the bliss she had once enjoyed in her father's home but is bitterly disappointed by the rational and practical ways of her husband. Her major drawback is that she is very possessive, a person fond of all the good things in life, and enjoys living. As the days advance everything becomes powerless to still the storm within, or exercise the creeping terror, the ravenous jaws of the spectre approaching closer and closer—Death. Maya revolts against this denial of life and her tragedy is heightened by another myth—the cry of the peacocks and she struggles to free herself from this nightmarish hallucination. Though she admits, she is not a rebel like Arjuna, she struggles to become a prey to death through a marriage which is far from happy. She further realizes that this marriage has hindered her liberation and her basic right to live.

“God now I was caught of the inescapable, and

where lay the possibility of mercy, of release ? Am I gone insane ? Father, Brother, Husband who is my saviour ? I am in need of one. I am dying and I am in love with living. I am in love, and I am dying God let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I'll never sleep again. There is no rest anymore—only death and waiting.

Finding no anchor, no respite, Maya's puzzled mind suddenly relishes the idea that it could quite possibly be Gautama who is destined to die, not she. Unable to sleep when this idea strikes her, she muses hysterically.

The man had no contact with the world, or me. What would it matter to him if he died and lost even the possibility of contact. What would it matter to him.

It is one of the major drawbacks of Desai's characters, that they shrink away from reality. They always try to build and take refuge in dream worlds of their own and crack up as soon as they are forced to confront reality. In the end Maya is not saved from becoming insane. Having tried, in vain, to transfix all that she experienced and saw about her. She is herself transfixed in her past, to be once again a child and she becomes a fairy princess in a fairy tale.

In her second novel *Voices in the City*—Anita Desai writes about the predicaments of various artists, groping for a vision, an aim, a path conducive to the development of healthy art in a city

which destroys as it creates. Since no metalled highway exists for the artist's journey, the writer has shown different wandering ways and tortuous lanes the artists of various shades and temperaments take and the relation they have with the society.

Mrs. Desai's characters are in a habit of reciting slokas from Bhagavad-Gita in moment of crisis. In *Voices in the City*, Monisha reads from the Gita and the words of Lord Krishna to Arjuna convey the theme of the novel. The advice of the lord that a man of steady wisdom is satisfied with the self, by the self alone and has cast out completely all desires from the mind, and that a 'self-controlled' saint 'remains unmoved when desire enters into him' suggest the 'problem' of the three main characters. Here again, as in the case of *Cry, the Peacock*, environment plays a vital role. If Maya revolted against the loneliness and solitude with not even a husband to share her agonies, Nirode, Amla and Monisha revolt against the sordidness, the brutality and the sheer dreariness of the physical world. They see through the appearances and experiences the dreariness of every day life more acutely than others. The ugly physical reality is something which they cannot accept. The external world is the antagonist which contests the characters at every moment of their lives. The frequent brief glimpses into unsuspected aspects of life create the environment, and remind the three main characters of the irritating and challenging quality of the external reality. The two sisters and their brother constitute an aristocracy not of wealth, but of sensitivity and suffering.

Anita Desai succeeds in interlinking the various elements of the novel by frequently changing her point-of-view and by relating the whole experience to two external archetypes—the mother and the city. Her characters get alienated due to lack of love. Nirode suspects his mother of having an illicit relationship with another man. This lack of affection help them upon falling upon illusion which they think is reality and are disillusioned. The theme of creativity and meaning is realized through these two archetypes. The novel explores the role of human creativity in man's quest for happiness. Each character in the novel typifies a particular kind of activity and each activity suggests a typical failure.

Life is all motion and all motion leads to destruction, so the source which activates human beings also destroys them. All the characters in the novel are striving towards a proper vocation. Nirode, dissatisfied with his journalism, is wavering on the point of involvement and detachment; Bose is hopefully working at his interpretations of the Panchatantra, Sonny dreams of a big export business; Dharma is projecting his alienation in art and Amla is planning to launch a career in advertising. They all share the same stirrings, are motivated by the same impulses, want to communicate and unite and yet they all fail. Their creative energies do not convene on a common point of value so that they all remain fragmented and unfulfilled. The novel posits a kind of paradox between activism and success, for, without activism there is no success, and all success leads ultimately to the

detrusion of the original impulse. We can see this paradox operative in the lives of all the characters. The little success that the "voice" brings to Nirode leaves him thwarted and frustrated. It brings him into contact with people he does not appreciate.

The intricacies of relationship—approach, recompense, obligation—these aroused in him violent distaste and kept him hovering in the fringe of the world that invites and spurned by turns, and for which he daily cared less. He had grown dreary even of artists and writers in whom he had, for many years, quixotically believed.

A key to the understanding of the novel, lies in our understanding of Calcutta. Anita Desai captures the creative—destructive dialectic of Calcutta with the skill of a painter, with a painter's sense of detail and proportion. The city of Calcutta is rightly chosen by her, where her characters move in search of meaning. The interaction that she suggests between the local and characters is not merely a matter of detail, it also suggests the direction in which human activity leads them. The black and white of Calcutta, its beauty and ugliness represent the quality of all human activity, the very spirit of Calcutta is protective and destructive at the same time. The relationship between the individual and the city that the novel suggests is of a highly metaphorical nature. Calcutta is symbolic of a whole culture with all its complexities and contradictions—the dream and nightmare of the romantic and sensitive Bengali soul.

According to B. Ramachandra Rao the theme of

this novel is the clash between the city and the voices. It is a struggle between unequal forces, and the three voices, need all their resources, their cleverness, and even deceptions to combat the city. To Monisha it is something which denies her 'her privacy' and she is 'whole' when she is 'alone'. For Nirode, however, his hatred of the city is inextricably connected with his hatred of his mother. If he reacts against the 'dark of Calcutta, its warmth that clung, to one with a moist, perspiring embrace, rich with the odours of open gutters and tuberose garlands, a letter from his mother is equally physically revolting. Her letter is like 'a ward enveloping succubus in the shape of a bright winged butterfly.' The mother merges with the city and the city becomes the mother an "amalgamation of death and life," Monisha, Nirode and Amla see the city as a force to be reckoned with. Nirode feels the pressure of the city and feels suffocated. Monisha is in love with loneliness reacts against her relatives in Calcutta and feels trapped in her husband's house. The Maya—Gautama tragedy is reacted in the Monisha—Jiban marriage. "Alone" she would feel "more whole" but the city neither offers nor respects privacy. Every thing is laid bare "to their scrutiny". No one can dare to communicate in such an surrounding. The three main characters make spiritual journeys from doubt, frustration and disillusionment, they travel through suffering and stumble their way to solutions of their own. It might be acceptance or abject self-surrender or self-annihilation. Obviously the problems of Anita Desai's characters are not ordinary problems. Earning their daily bread is never their problem.

Nirode's problem and the dream is that of escaping. He is abnormally sensitive. He moves from one false solution to another. Even his goals change with surprising rapidity. From a journalist he becomes a writer, starts a magazine, with the aim of bringing together disparate intellectuals. But this project is abandoned just when the magazine is proving to be a financial success. He is obsessed with the desire to fail, because succumbing to the line of success would be a compromise and that is the last thing he wants to do. Its Anita Desai's aim to keep the fight going instead of giving up.

"I want to fail—quickly. Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again, towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure, step by step to rock bottom. When you climb a ladder, all you find at the top is space, all you can do is to leap off—fall to the bottom."

He feels that to love or to hate, to resist or to compromise, is usually inconsequential., Monisha's death jolts him into a new awareness of life. In a struggle for liberation against a basically trapped situation, death becomes "a kind of to departure; release into liberty and peace." Monisha's death opens the doors of understanding for Nirode. It brings him knowledge of a reality he had never known before. Only after this awareness Nirode is able to see the duality of his mother, the duality of the city and the duality of existence. He is redeemed from his "one dimensional existence." In this novel Anita Desai is primarily concerned

with the dehumanization of man. She also tries to show for the artist, a way out of his dilemma, suggesting that between aesthetic and materialistic values, the artist should aim at the former without quite shunning the latter.

In her third book *'Bye-Bye, Black Bird'* the interaction between the locale and the individual acquires a new dimension, for the tension here between the white locale and the immigrant blackbird involves issues of alienation and accommodation that the immigrant has to confront in an alien yet familiar world. The migratory blackbird is drawn to and repelled by the white England as its new habitat. The writer captures this conflict through Dev, one of those eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk the streets like strangers in enemy territory. Dev has come to England with some intellectual pretensions, has come study at the London School of Economics, and the contact between the locale and the individual begins right from Adit's house. Anita Desai narrates the various experiences that Dev undergoes and the culture shock they give him. It is not singly an unfamiliar world that builds up the tension within him but the gap between the expected and the immediately received. This awareness creates a crisis of identity for him.

The novel revolves around this crisis of identity. The external landscape becomes the internal climate of these characters enmeshed in an existential groan. But Dev's response to the city of London has nothing of the emotional involve-

ment of Nirode or Monisha. In all his walks and bus rides through the town he feels offended by the silence and emptiness of it all. His reactions are unemotional. One can trace a trait of confusion in him which results in doubt. However, his character does not catch up the dilemma of alienation or identity of Srinivas in *The Nowhere Man*. The characters move against a background that allures them but leaves them dissatisfied. The voyages they have made into this alien land through imaginative literature and liberal education distorts their perception of reality. The novel keeps moving between the two layers of experience. The gap between the imagined and the real is the chief source of tension in the novel. A proper perspective of the novel emerges when Dev's dilemma's are seen to be emanating from his emotional and instinctive responses to the London scene. We get an insight into Dev's alienation and spiritual agony through his hellish experience in the London tube;

The menacing slither of escalators strikes into a speechless Dev as he is swept down with an awful sensation of being taken where he does not want to go. Down, down and further down—like Alice falling, falling down the rabbit hole, like a kafka stranger wandering through the dark labyrinth of a Prison.

Caught between acceptance and rejection, between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, Dev is tortured emotionally and intellectually and confused. London makes kind dream of an Indian empire where the roles between the Indians and English

will be reversed. Dev suffers because he keeps wavering between his choices.

The novel, among other things, dwells on the issue of an alien's accommodation within a tradition; there the writer suggests almost a mystic dialectic between the individual and the locale. It is the locale that ultimately draws the outsider into itself. Dev, who in the beginning is a cynical observer, is slowly drawn into London life and quite settles there.

Once again Anita Desai draws our attention to the annihilation of self that marriage involves, for a female; a theme subsequently found in her novels. Sarah has real love and understanding for Adit, which in turn Adit lacks. Sarah's character, therefore, has more power. It is in her that there is a real split. Adit is too preoccupied with himself to delve, into her thoughts. In Sarah there is a more fundamental and real dilemma, the real split, a keen suffering, but she triumphs over all these. She knows that a small refusal will inflame him. Thus she agrees to do whatever he likes. She does not want chaos to reflect on her marriage and would sacrifice everything to preserve it and so with all her hesitation and anxiety she accompanies Adit to India.

The theme of marital incompatibility is continued in *Where Shall We Go this Summer?* Desai's fourth novel, where the protagonist Sita leaves behind her business imprisoned husband and flees, with two of her children to an island off the Bombay coast where her guru father retired

after independence. The Gautama—Maya, Jiban Monisha tension is repeated here where Sita's manufacturer husband Raman represents everything which is practical, rational and sensible. The tussle between the husband and the wife is because one dwells in a world of illusion and the other in reality. Unlike the legendary Rama and Sita the couple here do not represent an ideal husband-wife relationship. In fact the names of the characters ironically suggest the complete lack of harmony in their lives. Raman accepts the norms and values of society while Sita refuses to accept the authority of society. Raman is a typical conformist, intelligent but devoid of the capacity for introspection, his reaction to his wife's frequent emotional outbursts is a mixture of puzzlement, wariness, fear and finally a resigned acceptance of her abnormality. Sita's escapade is rather her retreat from life which leads her to that existential plunge on the island.

Sita's voyage is a quest for discovery, her 'pilgrimage' to the sources of life, the hidden aspects of experience, a reality which can only be felt but never communicated. Raman and Sita accuse each other of madness as they look at reality from two different perspectives. Ironically this retreat to the island with its promise of renewal and regeneration implies at the same time alienation. Sita's alienation from her husband was inherent in her relationship with her father. The alienation is very powerfully communicated in the scene where Raman and Sita discuss their attitudes to the stranger they

had encountered while returning from Ajanta and Ellora :

He seemed so brave ? she blurted out "Brave ? him ?" Raman was honestly amused, "He was a fool—he didn't even know which side of the road to wait on." "Perhaps that was only innocence", Sita faltered.

The incident alienates Sita from her husband and latter when Sita looks at her marriage album she is,

.amused to turn from the album to the mirror and see the layers of experience and melancholy and boredom.

There is a constant struggle between illusion and reality, one of the favourite themes of the author. Sita's illusion of a possible escape from the cycles of experience are constantly shattered by the intrusion of a reality which she so desperately seeks to avoid. She rebels against the violence and the 'madness' of "familiar pattern". Her, final disillusionment comes when she discovers that the island did not offer her even the bare necessities of life. The experience leads to 'a paralysis kind' of fear in her. The thesis of the novel propounds that there is no reality except the one that one lives. Sita's awareness of the island, and alongwith that of her own self, deepens as she comes to realise the distance between illusion and reality, between herself and the island, between herself and her father, between the island and the sea. The continuity in change is communicated by the pervasive presence

of the sea as a mystic backdrop, which reminds us of the concluding pages of Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and the evocative sea imagery of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. This relation between identity and alienation keeps disturbing Sita till she discovers that undifferentiated life is like a Jelly fish, live and objective, but formless. Sita identifies her quest in the jelly fish and realizes that one cannot flee from the reality as she had attempted to do. The whole novel is a story of illusions melting away in the cold light of everyday commonplace experiences. A life of complete inwardness of a neurotic subjective indulgence is not a solution to the problems of life. Nor is the other extreme of complete conformity and total draining out of the individuality and imaginative vitality as a person the proper way out of the dilemma. One should try to connect the prose and passion of life. Sita's tragedy arises out of her unwillingness to grow up and accept the responsibilities of an adult life and her failure to connect the prose with the passion. She accompanies her husband back to the prosaic life, not as before but with a regenerated spirit.

From the 'Jeevan-Ashram' on the island we are thrown upto 'Carignano' on the Kasauli hills in '*Fire on the Mountain*' Desai's fifth novel, where her favourite theme of withdrawal, loneliness and fatality emerge out of the story of Nanda Kaul—a widow, living all by herself, withdrawn from the world of "Bags and letters, messages and demands, requests, promises and queries." Seeking an absolute isolation she identifies herself with the 'barrenness' of Carignano and the starkness of the rocks, pines and

mountains. She fancies herself to be a tree" no more no less. " The appropriateness of her lonely, haunted and her rather dismal existence is verified for her when she reads a quotation from "*When a Woman Lives Alone*" :

When a woman lives alone, her house should be extremely dilapidated, the mud wall should be falling to pines and if there is a pond it should be overgrown with water plants.
I greatly dislike a woman's house where it is clear she has survived about with a knowing look on her face, arranging everything just as it should be and when the gate is tightly shut.

She seeks a stillness that will exclude all movement, animate and inanimate. In fact the novel grows out of a contrast between stillness and movement. While 'carignano' minimizes human movements, the movements in nature continue to remind the reader at a reality, where attempts of an absolute stillness appear to be completely unnatural. Her withdrawal stands for an emotional staidity, a kind of psychic frigidity that refuses any intrusion and movement. The imagery used by the novelist deftly highlights, Nanda's longing for seclusion and stillness. Her desire for stillness is likened to a :

Charred tree trunk is the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall. A tree trunk would not harbour irritation, nor a pillar annoyance. She would imitate death like a lizard. No one would dare rouse her.

The dramas which had been enacted in Carignano were primarily of marital discord. The maiden ladies considered themselves rather superior to the common lot. This, however, was to overcome their sense of frustration and loneliness, so even with Nanda Kaul, Carignano lives upto its past history. To all appearances, Nanda had led a prosperous and happy married life. She was a perfect housewife, loving and loved, having the world at her command, sniffing around for the smell of brasso. "She struck awe into visitors and left them slightly gaping" and her husband was courteous and attentive, "Mr. Kaul wanted her always in silk, at the head of the long rosewood table, entertaining his guests," however, in spite of all these Mr. Kaul had been in love with another woman throughout his life and Nanda being a proud woman had never disclosed her feelings to her husband. This busy and intense world of her husband, thus led her to relish her afternoons, which were but a preparation for Carignano.

Thus, she resents company, and despises any one who tries to interfere with her life. The unexpected arrival of Raka unnerves her and disturbs her privacy. She even resents the occasional visits of the postman and the prospect of having a child for a couple of days. Earlier, left to herself, she could groan "with self pity and pain, certain that she was alone and no one would hear," but now in Raka's presence she was not able to do so. To Nanda she was an intruder, "a mosquito flown up from the plains to tease and worry." The old woman and the child prowl around one another in a stately well-mannered way, each guarding her indepen-

dence and privacy. Both Raka and Nanda work out the means by which they would live together avoiding each other, but 'it was not simple to exist and appear not to exist.' If Nanda Kaul shuns all movement Raka loves it.

Nostalgia for a lost innocence and awareness of a decaying life are recurrent themes in Anita Desai, and in this novel the contrast between the two is made evident in the two characters of Raka and Nanda. The natural instinctive aloofness of Raka, and the planned, self-imposed withdrawal of Nanda Kaul is juxtaposed in the novel and no one is so actively conscious of this polarity than Nanda herself:

Nanda turned to look on her (Raka) that was reproachful rather than welcoming . . . but Raka ignored her, ignored her so calmly, so totally that it made Nanda breathless. Nanda Kaul's indifference is born out of "vengeance for a long life of duty and obligation", but Raka, is a recluse by nature, for she had not arrived at this condition by a long route of rejection and sacrifice—she was born to it simply." In the quest for aloofness Raka for outdoes Nanda.

The interaction between these two contrasted approaches of desire for isolation brings out in artistic terms their existential predicament in which the canker for loneliness can contaminate, both young and old, irrespective of their journey from innocence to experience.

The contrast between Nanda and Raka lead us back to the theme of withdrawal and lack of com-

munication. These gaps are different from that experienced by Maya and Gautama. Nanda Kaul's life was full on the surface but empty at the core. The trauma of childhood, on the other hand, had blunted the native thrust of Raka's soul. They both seek to exclude what they need most, the security and fulfilment of love. Realizing that Raka has lacked the tender care and love, necessary for a child, Nanda changes her attitude towards her and begins to woo Raka with long stories about her imaginary childhood trying to make contact by hooking the child's curiosity but Raka is too way to be caught.

Through Nanda Kaul intends to evade the reality of human experience, in her inner self-imposed exile, she ends up by creating an illusory substitutes. Even this substitute reality is destroyed by the intrusion of Ila Das's murder over the telephone shatters for ever Nanda's world of reverie. At the same time Raka sets fire to the mountain and her shout 'Look, Nani, I have set the forest on fire is symbolic of the fact that a world where a woman cannot hope to be happy without being unnatural, should be destroyed. The fire consumes the fictive world of Nanda Kaul.

In her latest four dimensional piece *Clear Light of Day* the author has moved closer to the aesthetic goal she has been striving after, in all her novels. The anguish of a sensitive young woman trapped in the pattern of movement and stillness has been rendered here almost into a musical piece. All that had appeared tentative, seemingly awkward or

apparently clumsy earlier seems to have acquired, the suggestiveness of finality, of dexterity of movement, of seriousness of intent, making one is inclined to say that the writer has finally discovered the right blend of expression to suit her aesthetic goal.

The novel in her own words is about time as a destroyer, time as a preserver and about what the bondage of time does to people. The novel touches aspects of life that are universal. The novelist is mainly interested in discovering a pattern and a meaning out of an apparent meaningless life in a small family and this strikes the strongest note of hope and affirmation.

In *Clear Light of Day*, there is anger, bitterness, but there is also an effort to reconcile and accommodate. All the elements that threaten to disrupt the pattern of life in all its aspects are brought under control through love, understanding, forgiveness and mutual acceptance. The triumph of these values over despair and destruction 'leaves the reader joyously participating in the musical recital that concludes the novel.'

Anita Desai picks up the threads of the story at a point where Tara and her husband Bakul come visiting home after a lapse of time in anticipation of the wedding of Raja's daughter Mayna. The first section of the novel narrates their arrival and the events that follow in the Das house. This provides an excellent opportunity to the writer to see the action from a dual perspective of past and

present. The characters as they move in the present are constantly looking back at the past, observing, examining, evaluating themselves in the perspective of time. Through a highly controlled use of split narrative and flash back Anita Desai makes the readers see the world from the perspective of childhood. In her novel *Fire on the Mountain* and in some of her short stories this attempt has been made to see the tragic reality of adult existence from the eyes of the innocent. This invariably leaves the reader with a feeling of overwhelming despair. Here we are also made to see the tragic reality of the Das household from the eyes of the children when they were young and when they grow up to observe themselves now in the remoteness of time. This juxtaposition of the past and the present, the near and the remote, the subjective and the objective, while suggesting the theme of continuity in change also keeps us alive to the changing dimensions of reality.

There is the perspective of childhood when reality is seen in terms of the clarity of childhood and innocence and there is the perspective of clarity of experience and maturity and when the same reality is seen congealed in memory into bias and prejudices. The perspective of childhood, however, dominates the novel, as the adult world is only seen as an extension of their childhood. The contrast between childhood and adulthood is central to the aesthetic design of the novel. There is the dialogue on childhood between Tara, Bakul and Bim.

I think it is simply amazing how very little one sees or understands even about ones home or family

says Tara to which Bakul says

What else do children they are to preoccupied with themselves children may see, but they never comprehend

‘No one comprehends better than children do. No one feels the atmosphere more keenly—or catches all the nuances all the insinuations in the air—or note those details that escape elders.

Bim, being very observant is able to give a clear picture of childhood and she is the only person in the family who has clung to the childhood memories, while others have left it far behind.

There is no doubt that Anita Desai is able to find reality in the children’s world. The novel thus succeeds in contrasting the violent and diseased world of the adults, with the dream like world of the children. The images of sickness, disease, violence that appear quite frequently are balanced by these of joy, enthusiasm, curiosity and romantic aspiration. The children try to articulate their unconscious longings by trying to see beyond their absurd world. For instance Hyder Ali riding on his white horse and letting Raja see into his poetic environment and rich library lends a concrete shape to Raja’s poetic sensibility; Bim exposed to the world of knowledge imbibes the heroic idealism

of Joan of Arc and Florence Nightingale, Tara in turn discovers a world of tenderness and love in her adolescent infatuation with her teacher; and even the retarded Baba is able to make his own inarticulate world articulate in the sounds of the gramophone that he collects from Hyder Ali's deserted house. The children grow from awareness to awareness, are tormented by the growing gulf between this world and the world impinging upon them from outside, happily enmeshed in their own dreams and fantasies they are drawn to forces outside themselves that change the tempo and tenor of their lives.

The theme of irretrievability of a lost childhood paradise that lent the air of tragic fatality to her earlier fiction acquires a new dimension in this novel. Here she is not concerned with loss or gain, but more prophetically with the gain that is inherent in all loss and all loss that is inherent in all gain. For instance, Tara who seems to have lost her identity in marriage, gains in terms of family and motherhood; Raja who seems to have lost his Byronic aspirations in marriage, realizes his dream in his courageous decision to marry the daughter of his childhood idol, Hyder Ali, Bim who seems to have lost, love marriage and domesticity acquires everything in the wisdom that goes with her acceptance, that her house is the root for all of them.

Anita Desai alludes to the sustaining presence of the mother in a number of ways. When the

mother fails to take care of the children, we have Mira Masi, when Mira Masi dies we have Bim acting as the foster-Father and mother to her brothers and sister. In the novel we find three aspects of the mother fictionalized in as one who bears, the mother who cares and the mother who shares. Bim's life acquires a heroic dimension in this symbolic motherhood, for she not only sustains the family, she also sustains the house which is metaphysically suggestive of tradition. She thus becomes symbolic of forces that sustain and support life against all destructive impulses. Her revolt against the traditional image of the Indian woman is manifested in all that she says or does. She opts out of marriage out of her own will, and she refuses to play the conventional role of a submissive wife and becomes in sense a truly liberated woman.

Bim achieves her 'self' not in isolation but in togetherness. She is the knight in quest of selfhood which she achieves not in rejection but in acceptance, not in withdrawal but in positive commitment. The novel as a whole seeks the ultimate wisdom of life in one intuitive understanding and a rational acceptance of the various polarities and contradictions of life. Her commitment to her role sustains Bim against the onslaughts of time and makes her in turn the sustaining centre of her family. The self straining itself in isolation is compared to the swail "an eternal miniature sisyphus." Who turns upon itself so that the quest for selfhood is seen not turning upon itself, but as an extension of others. The writer alludes to

this theme through a series of highly suggestive metaphors which add to the rich and complete texture of the novel. For instance the theme of movement and stillness is suggested through the metaphors of the stagnant pool and the evergrowing tree. A static domestic life is like a stagnant pool in which the mothering instinct, suggested by the drowned cow, was likely to be permanently drowned. Contrasted to this is Mira Masi who cares for the emotionally orphaned children and thinks of herself as a tree, the source of life and sustenance. Similarly the theme of relatedness is suggested through repeated references to the balustrade. The balustrade exists only in relation to the individual balusters supporting it. When Bim is able to see this, she forgets all her bitterness that had alienated her from Raja and Tara.

As reflected in all her novels, Anita Desai has also portrayed decay and degeneration, violence and bloodshed, alienation and revolt and finally the quest of the protagonist in search of identity. When Bim realizes her self, it seems as though the sky has cleared and the day is lighted. The whole book with its minute details and poetic narratives resembles a verse structure.

Thus, in all her novels the same themes recur again and again by which she tries to project the reason for her protagonists behaving in a peculiar manner. By using these basic themes as the foundation of her work, she tries to assess the need for an individual to have communication, understanding, forgiveness and mutual acceptance and through

these to discover ones own identity. This discovery will bring an end to all the miseries which confront them—their lack of a common bond, their being left out and feeling lost, and their sense of futility and despair.

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CHAPTER IV

Plot—Structure in the Novels

IT is often said that Anita Desai's fiction does not have a thick plot or story line. Her own views on plot which she expressed in an interview was like this :

I start writing without having very much of a 'plot' in my mind, or on paper, only a very hazy idea of what the pattern of the book is to be. But it seems to work itself out as I go along, quite naturally and inevitably. I prefer the word 'Pattern' to 'Plot' as it sounds more natural like Hopkin's 'inscape' while 'plot' sounds arbitrary, heavy-handed and artificial, all that I wish to avoid. One should have a pattern and then fit the characters, the settings and scenes into it—each piece in keeping with the others and so forming a balance whole.

Instead of a plot, though she emphasizes on pattern and rythm she recognizes the need for relating the parts to the whole. According to her no one aspect of the novel can assure supremacy over another. Though writing for self is a great need to her, she is fully aware that it is not as simple as gathering chrysanthemums and a compulsive writer like herself should do well to build a small world of tradition. She prefers not to draw on established themes, plots and people for her creative world. The story must develop to its own requirements, at its own pace, right from the humble start to its gradual climax. She weaves an artistic design around a significant situation with conscious and graceful rhythm, a kind of a poetic felicity.

She had once declared that all her writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things and next to this exploration of the underlying truth and the discovery of primitive mythology and philosophy is the style that interests her most and by this she means the conscious labour of uniting language and symbol, word and rhythm and to obtain a certain integrity and impose order on chaos. Her novels are usually divided into parts mostly as the quartert division. They don't have a familiar beginning where the novel begins with the childhood of the protagonist and concludes with his old age. There is a constant intermingling of the past and present with a hint of the foreboding future. Her novels are usually divided into three or four parts.

One of the major field of interest for Anita Desai

is to show her readers how the characters in her novels, react to the various situations that confront them. Her characters are highly complex. In order to weave to the various threads of these complex minds she employs various narrative devices and projects the workings of their psyche. Whereas she presents Monisha through the pages of her diary, for Maya, she erects a dramatic structure of three parts, showing the origin, development and culmination of Maya's neurosis.

In case of *cry, the Peacock* we have Maya's distraught mind, her mental writhings, her defeat of fate and her eventual fall into the labyrinths of insanity, prove this novel is analytical. Had Anita Desai chosen to write this novel through the dramatic point of view we would have never had the Psychological probings of Maya's mind, battling her fate and then her insanity. So she manipulated her view points in three parts, first the dramatic, then the first person and lastly the omniscient. The first section emphasizes the lack of Psychological depths in certain people. Maya's actions are read by others in the light of traditional beliefs and customs. Here the speaker projects dramatically Maya's response to the death of her pet dog she shows a reverence for death, even though it is only her pet dog. At this point we know nothing of her emotional or mental turmoil, but we become aware of her singular trait of attempting to remove emotional and mental pain by indulging in some physical exertion. She tries to "wipe the vision from her eyes" of the dead dog staring at the garden tap. Tense as she is, wanting desperately to make her husband feel the pregnancy

of the day's happenings, and is repelled by his surgeon like responses as he performs the last rites of Toto.

At the very first the readers are introduced to the contrastive natures of Maya and Gautama. Their actions are a result of polar motivations. In part one it is Gautama's personality that is revealed more forcefully and not Maya's. Her personality is more prominent in part two where she rivets the readers to her consciousness and her world. In the second part which is rendered in the first person by Maya herself, she battles against her fate and realizing that she is not emotionally, morally strong enough ; she looks about for a saviour to whom she might cling, but everyone fails her. As a result of her ever-present tendency to read in the fluctuations of nature and always being aware of the albino astrologer's predictions with no support or sympathy for her grief, she likens herself to the Peacocks who indulge in a wild dance before their death. She begins to feel that she is going insane. There is no closeness in their marriage and one thing that she doesn't learn from him which is quite possibly her undoing is detachment. Her sense of possessiveness nurtured as it is in her childhood and in her youth never leaves her. All she wants is a contact with some thing, some one to lean on, but finding no anchor or respite, her restlessness increases every day and suddenly relishes the idea that it could quite possibly be Gautama who is destined to die not she.

In part three, through the omniscient point of view we learn of Maya's prancing about childishly through the consciousness of Nila and her mother.

Having tried in vain to transfix all that she experiences and sees about her, she is herself transfixed in her past to be once again a child. One of the most remarkable things about this novel is the building up of the tension of presenting the hideous transformation of a sensitive poetic young woman into insane individual.

The story of Monisha is similar to that of Maya, but the building up of tension is not presented as vividly as it is in case of Maya. Here too have the similar theme of marital discord, and alienation where a young woman is driven to suicide stifled and suffocated in a joint family. Her brother Nirode and sister Amla, do not meet the same fate as hers, but face failures at all their activities. Anita Desai has very cleverly alluded to the theme of loneliness in a crowd by presenting the crowded city of Calcutta where the three brothers and sisters feel left alone and cut out. All the characters in the novel are striving towards something—a proper vocation. They all share the same stirrings, are motivated by the same impulses, want to communicate they unite and yet they all fail. The whole novel depicts the protagonists who come to the city with all the energy and enthusiasm to work and establish themselves, but all their creative energies do not converge in a common point of integration; nor that they all remain fragmented and unfulfilled. Each character in the novel typifies a particular kind of activity and each activity typifies a particular kind of failure. The novel gains in density as these failures are related to the actions of the three central characters, whose lives are shaped by their mother in the unconscious and who discover this unconscious

influence in their foster mother—Calcutta city. The novel posits a kind of paradox between activism and success as without activism there is no success and all success ultimately lead to the destruction of the original impulse and repeatedly turns to the tragedy of a man in society where both art and life are devoid of love. The characters waver between their success and failures and in the end realise the futility of all their struggle.

If in *Cry, the Peacock* the action is presented in the first person, the *Voices in the City* is mostly a third person rendering of three voices—the voices of Nirode, Amla and Monisha. Here the direct method of explaining the action necessarily sacrifices the challenging possibilities of the first person rendering. There is a brief glimpse into the diary of Monisha and her last soliloquy which explains to the reader her decision to commit suicide, but this constitutes only a very small portion of the book the omniscient author offers explanations and analyses the changing responses of the three major characters to the challenges of the city. Each character typifies a particular type of activity and each activity suggests a typical failure. The novel gains in density as these failures are related to the actions of the three central characters, whose lives are shaped by the mother in the unconscious and who discover this unconscious influence in their foster mother—the city of Calcutta. All the characters are individuals striving towards something or looking for a proper vocation. They all share the same stirrings are motivated by the same impulses, want to communicate and yet they all fail. The whole novel

reveal to the readers the various types of escapists, trying to elude reality. Dharma and David the two minor characters as contrasted with the city and its misfits, represent a positive value, Dharma with his mystery and wisdom and David, "the unattacked, drifting bird creature," has that vital element of love missing in the three protagonists. The contrasts are stark, vivid and the satire of the victims of the city, savage, the satiric picture of the industrialist's ambitious wife who turned from social work to Indian culture, the coffee house with the sticky fans, the haunt of the young man who never worried about anything as long as they had coffee and cinema to fall back on—the lash of satire touches every one. There is more disgust and less compassion in these fleeting glimpses into the minds and hearts of the minor characters.

The novel repeatedly turns to the tragedy of man in a society where both art and life are devoid of love. Absence of love reduces every creative art into a self-destructive act. In this bleak and dismal world, love and artistic creativity alone seem to have some positive value. The whole novel is designed to present the various creative activities pursued, which rescues one from total destruction. Nirode finds solace in the creative friendship of David, Dharma recovers from his solitude through the love of Amla, Bose finds creativity meaningful in his contacts with Amla, creative involvement somehow rescues them all including the mother who remains active even in her self-chosen isolation. It is Monisha alone who seeks them in human relationship and is finally destroyed. The writer is concerned in this

novel primarily with this dehumanization of man. This she achieves not merely through tone, atmosphere narrative voice and characterization but also by her moving poetic prose. Thus, Nirode is described as a "dripping gargoyle-grotesque, offensive, comic, emblem of the black and powerful magical rites of the city one of its many." The novel tries to stress that the root of the escapist's misery is the absence of positive faith or a sense of permanent commitment. Nirode has the Hamlet like hesitation and agrees that his undoing is "because of this lack of faith and questioning."

The structure in this novel is so designed to clearly present the miserable plight of an idealistic artist, the writer shows the artist a way out of his dilemma that between aesthetic and materialistic values, the artist should aim at the former, though without quite shunning the latter.

Anita Desai is quite adept in portraying the gradual growth to the climax whether they are death dance of the peacocks or the alienation and accommodation of black birds. Anita Desai captures this conflict in fictional terms through Dev, one of those eternal immigrants who can never accept their new home and continue to walk the streets like strangers in enemy territory, frozen, listless, but dutifully trying to be busy, unobtrusive and however, superficially to belong. The novel traces the various phases through which Dev finally comes to accept his new home. Each phase in Dev's reconciliation suggests a psychic situation involving cross-cultural contents and the impact they have on individual sensibility. The novel is about the alienation and

accommodation of the immigrant in a world which is alluring and appalling at the same time. It does not bring into fictional context the larger social and political aspects of the immigrant question, rather it deals with self awareness of the educated Indian immigrant who keeps wavering between acceptance and rejection of a world they have been educated to admire, which they find on actual contact either strange or hostile. The first section entitled 'Arrival' depicts the conflict between provincialism and cosmo-politanism which is the root of all social prejudice and violence. As the novel progresses, the metaphor of the immigrant on an alien expands to include humanity caught in a world where choices are impossible to make. In Part II, titled 'Discovery and Recognition', Anita Desai focuses on the polarised responses of Dev and Adit to the locale. The verbal encounters between the two help define the novel's point-of-view while Adit's responses are imbibed with scientific rationalism, Dev's responses have something very vague about them. His responses to Batters a power station, for example, are peculiarly oriental. While Adit resents Dev's near idolatrous attitude to the power station Dev raises 'his arms' in "an unconscious frenzy of excitement." The contrast between Dev and Adit are, therefore, central to the novel. They are not merely two individuals, but they represent two philosophies of life. Sara is a more realistic character whose suffering is much more intense than her other two characters. In her there is the real split, a real dilemma, a real suffering, but she triumphs over all these. "She is a silent volcano not dead not yet bursting." The final section of the novel, *Departure*, makes several kind of depar-

tures. Most of the characters depart from their original stances and take new positions not quite consistent with their earlier stances. Adit the sophisticated "wog" turns suddenly into a nationalist. While the week-end in the village brings solace and comfort to Dev it leaves Adit totally shattered. The two experiences of Adit and Dev give a new perspective to the novel.

The first part of the novel titled *Monsoon '67* is heavily loaded with image of brutality and violence seen not only in acts and incidents, but also in forms of behaviour, unable to reconcile herself to this violence, she takes the extraordinary step of going to the island of Manori where her father had created "magic". The story is about two journeys, one undertaken to escape from immediate surroundings, another to move towards something of the future created out of the illusions we all hold of the past. This is the beginning of the journey. One by one each episode in her life is revealed, each with its residue until we encounter her as a child playing with her brother Jivan in Part-II entitled *Winter '47*, she wonders why she has no resemblance with her sister Rekha. The mystery surrounding her father's identity grows as we turn the pages. Believing that in every one's life there comes a day when convention must be challenged, Sita begins her journey to the island and her flight seems to be a pathetic imitation of her vain attempt to save a young bird from the rapacious crows. In her flight, she discovers herself. The final section of the novel is concerned with Sita's recovery from her plunge into existential nullity. Sita discovers her natural roots and connections by

reviving her contact with the soil. Her healing and renewal beings with a ritualized mud bath. In her journey in discovering herself she reveals to us the agonies of the journey as transparently as the jollyfish does its self. The conclusion of the novel is similar "healing" return to the normalcy of life—to the regularity that had so much appalled Sita.

Nanda Kaul is another escapist who has retired to the hill to be alone. Though she is very different from Maya, Monisha and Sita, she experiences the same loneliness, alienation and disgust with life. Anita Desai has very cleverly unfolded the theme by presenting Nanda amidst the pines, where she gets the news of the arrival of Raka. The first two sections of the novel describe the solitary experience of two females similar in temperament though different in age, *Fire on the Mountain* has a plot which is one of the best creations of Anita Desai. Here the plot development is quite neat. The novel unfolds gently the changing relationships between Raka and Nanda. Nanda is taken aback by the complete rejection and tries to win over the child's interest by telling her inventory stories of adventure, undertaken by her father. However, the child shows very little interest in her stories and further becomes very much strained. In the process of winning over Raka's attention she undergoes a metamorphosis, where she realizes the emptiness beneath the seeming facade of fulfilment, but she fails miserably to establish any contact with the child. The plot proceeds to present another character, Ila Das, an old friend of Nanda's whose life suggests another dimension of misery and meaningless existence. Ila has a lot of

admiration for Nanda, unaware of the bitterness and dissatisfaction that life beneath the dignified look and silk sarees of the latter. Nanda is shocked at the news of Ila's rape and murder and this completely shatters her spirit and desire for the tender bond of love. Speaking of her plots, this novel is one of Desai's brilliant examples where the symbolic meaning is achieved gradually without any hinderence.

Clear, Light of Day,—Desai's latest novels not only excels her former works in plot structure, but also is theme, character, style and vision. This is her most mature work. Unlike the other novels, here the plot begins and ends in a conventional pattern with some incident or does not end with a suicide or death. We begin with the song of the Koel and end with the song of the old master, thus, suggesting a fusion of the rhythms of life, both natural and human. The writer experiences the final wisdom of life not in unity but unity in diversity, not in monotonies but in the tapestry of many hues, not in a single line, but in a pattern of many lines, not in finality of form but in the tentative formlessness. It is in this mood of absorbtion that we discover Bim, the major character in the novel at the end.

The four sections of the novel suggesting 'the four dimensions' of time, record the transitions that take place in a new Delhi family. Though centred on Bim, the oldest of four children, the novel is not primarily focused on her. There is an attempt to see the events in time from the perspective of childhood and age. The novel is about the growth of four children in an apparently absurd and "grey" world.

The Das household is a microcosm of an absurd world, which has little to offer by the way of love, hope or inspiration. The novel unfolds two young girls grow up with their indifferent and disinterested parents, with a diabetic mother a father who is nothing but "a master of entrance and exit" and a mentally retarded brother. To add to this responsibility of nursing to a young tubercular brother and an alcoholic old aunt who in the course of time becomes an emotional liability, the novel describes how these four children grow up in an absurd world where indifferent, disease and irrationality seem to thwart all normal human responses. This domestic drama of absurdity takes place against the background of the partition of the country, suggesting another pattern of violence, blood-shed and absurdity. The death of the parents leave the parents emotional destitutes. Tara, the younger girl marries and goes abroad and Raja the elder of the two brothers gets married to the daughter of their Muslim aristocrat neighbour. Bim is left to look after the house and Baba. The story opens when there is a family reunion after a long lapse of time when Raja's daughter gets married. Bim in the meantime has undergone untold agonies and has become a prey to a lot of bitterness and sorrow. She feels that Tara and Raja have been ungrateful towards her and Tara had evaded all the responsibilities and Bim had to face everything. The novel suggests two perspectives symbolically. The perspective childhood, however, dominates the novel. The contrast that the author suggests between these two perspectives are central to the aesthetic design of the novel. The plot succeeds in contrasting the

violent and diseased world of the adults with the dream like world of the children, then it moves to present the bitterness that Bim experienced in their adulthood specially after receiving the letter from Raja. Bim does not crack up like Desai's other protagonists but she emerges victorious after all the mishaps she does not get defeated and this she achieves by forgetting all the prejudices any grievances and forgiving all against whom she had nourished such thoughts. Thus, the climax shows Tara asking Bim's forgiveness for having betrayed her in the past and Bim reassuring her and finally tearing up Raja's letter and by this forgetting the bitter past. The plot succeeds in featuring the vision of the author which explains that love, understanding and forgiveness are qualities while triumph over despair and destruction.

It is evident that the plot structure that Anita Desai employs is not deliberate and planned but formulates itself naturally as the story advances. Her statements that she does not believe in a plot is not true, as she definitely has a plot in each novel, but it is subordinated to the characters and themes. The plot is woven so naturally that it appears as if there is no disordering of materials. Thus, there is the triumph of her plot-structure which showing the beauty of an art conceals itself.

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CHAPTER V

Conclusion

AT once reminiscent of Faulkner in a concern with a heroine who lives in the past, Janet Frame in exploring the world of the insane, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf in attempting to reduce the thoughts of the heroine to the stream of consciousness technique, D.H. Lawrence in presenting the conflict between the instinctual and the intellectual and a host of Indo-Anglican novelists by echoing the East-West Theme ; Anita Desai deserves the compliment of having firmly established the Psychological Novel in the world of Indo-English fiction.

In her novels she explores the Indian mind as it comes to grips with its environment. Unlike many other Indian writers in English, Mrs. Desai is not interested in merely telling a story. Her technique is not that of a mere narrator who subordinates character to the business of telling a story. She is more interested in her characters and themes and primarily her views. This lends her novel a poetic

depth, a psychological sophistication which was lacking in Indo-Anglian fiction. The interaction between the poetic texture and narrative structure raises her novel to a higher level of artistic success.

Each novel by Mrs. Desai is a marvel of technical skill. Everything irrelevant or superfluous is pruned out. So carefully is this pruning done that her novel are little masterpieces with beautiful formal perfection and poetic richness. The novels are happy example of an fusion of form with content, of texture with structure.

The basic idea in her novels is man's quest for wisdom, freedom, love and understanding. She plans each novel in such a way that it seeds this aspect in them. Her themes form a homogenous cluster. Her characters in search of their aim discover many things. Anita Desai utilizes every mechanism she has at her disposal to make her ideas clear. She has subtle gift for suggesting things and the works through flashes which provide us important dues to the action of the novel. She observes every sight and sound with an uncommon intensity. Nothing escapes her eyes, not even the leg of a spider. This intensity and density of texture compensates for the absence of a strong plot or story line in her fiction.

Behind her exquisite prose passages, however, there lies a horrifying, almost macabre, sense of fatality which she renders in equally macabre and near-morbid detail. She seems to be struggling in her art towards the mastery of a violence which seems to threaten her protagonists. Right from *Cry, the*

Peacock this violence has persisted in her work as a kind of inevitability, forcing one to conclude that it has some kind of metaphysical or psychological significance not yet explored and analysed. She does not believe in connections. In her fiction conventional elements do not seem to exist. They simply grow out and are not observed till they have grown out. This unexpectedness is perhaps the only fictional element in her fiction. Gautama's murder, Adit's reversal and Raka's fire on the mountain come to us as totally unexpected events and shock us into the recognition of a reality which we had all along ignored.

If one is out to be inquisitive about her philosophy of life, her attitude to modern society and its situation in the present-day-world, her critical trends, in general, in respect of her field of interest, she may rather than attempting to quench it, choose to point to her work, and observe quiet about the process of her own development. Her remarks on her writing very clearly projects this aspect.

To an extent all writing is self-indulgency and therefore, one has to observe a certain discipline, set oneself certain limits. If I didn't see the stream of consciousness it would become a dangerous method for me. I do not want to exclude the primistic quality of life from fiction. I find it too interesting and a purely subjective method of writing would make it impossible.

In spite of many significant achievements of Mrs. Desai the problems of an Indian writer in English remains unsolved. Her world is very much restricted

and excludes much that is authentically Indian. Her characters are all from the well-to-do sections of the Indian society. Their problems are psychological or spiritual, not social or economical. They passionately discuss issues like conformity and rebellion, attachment and detachment, but ordinary problems of everyday life are never really touched upon. Since her characters belong to the affluent sections of the Indian society they never really have to face the problem of the struggle for existence. She explores the limited area of life as she is very well versed with them. However, ignoring these drawbacks one can conclude that Mrs. Desai has given a new dimension to fiction writing in Indian by colouring it in a different hue than it was done earlier. Further it is not the business of a novelist to solve the problems of his or her fellow artists. Her characters in her fiction get deprived neither of their dignity nor position nor of their polarity of opposite states of attitudes and feelings, within the psychological limits. She has a great regard and faith in human life and individuality. Her aura of imagination is not allowed to run riot and sacrifice the truths of life.

Sincere to her conviction as an artist, Anita Desai in her novels seizes upon that in complete and seemingly meaningless mass of reality around her and tries to "discover its significance by plunging below the surface and plumbing the depth and their illuminating those depth till they become a more lucid, brilliant and explicable reflection of the visible world." Surely, this is no mean an achievement, by any standards, however, rigorous.

Anita Desai is perhaps the only Indo-English

novelist who lays stress on the landscape and correlates it with the psychic states of her protagonists, she has rare gift of suggesting things: In order to throw clues to the action of the story, the novelist employs various devices such as flashes, asides and painting landscape. Anita Desai's technique is her natural outcome of her pre-occupation with the individual's psychology combined with her vivid awareness of the external world. She is always primarily occupied with the subjective experience of her people, their sensations in the presence of one another, and at the same time she is aware how she looks from the outside of their tone and manner, the setting in which they play their parts, and that which gives them an objective reality. It is, therefore, impossible for her to maintain strictly the point of view of any character, keeping to the subjective aspect of things. The novelist can be seen passing back and forth between subjective and objective, within the chapter, within the paragraph.

Regarding her vision she had once declared "All my writing is an effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things—Next to this exploration of the underlying truth and the discovery of a private mythology and philosophy is its style that interests me most—and by this I mean the conscious labour of uniting language and symbol and word and rhythm—one must find a way to unite the inner and outer rhythms, to obtain a certain integrity and to impose order on chaos."

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